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**HOW CITIES ERODE GENDER INEQUALITY:  
A New Theory and Evidence from Cambodia**

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*Support for gender equality has increased globally, and studies of this trend usually examine individual- and/or country-level factors. However, this overlooks subnational variation. City-dwellers are more likely to support gender equality in education, employment, leadership, and leisure. This article investigates the causes of rural–urban differences through comparative, qualitative research in Cambodia. The emergence of rural garment factories presents a quasi-natural experiment to test the theory that female employment enhances support for gender equality. Rural female employment may diminish rural–urban differences in gender inequalities or there may be other important aspects of city-living (beyond female employment) that amplify support for gender equality. Drawing on Cambodian fieldwork, I suggest that cities raise the opportunity costs of the male breadwinner model, increase exposure to women in socially valued roles, and provide more associational avenues to collectively contest established practices. Interests, exposure, and association reinforce a snowballing process of social change. By investigating the causes of subnational variation, I advance a new theory of growing support for gender equality.*

**Keywords:** *urban; rural; gender; gender equality; social change*

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There are many hotly contested debates in gender studies, but here are three points of agreement. First, support for gender equality has increased, in many countries, over the past five decades. Second, support is usually higher in cities (Boudet et al. 2012; Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Chung and Das Gupta 2007; Evans 2018; Vaz, Pratley, and Alkire 2016). Third, gender relations are not only shaped by individual characteristics, but also macro-level structures and interactional contexts (including local norms) (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004; Thébaud and Pedulla 2016; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Scholars have debated why gender relations are changing over time. This article engages with that debate through comparative rural and urban fieldwork, interviewing long-term residents as well as rural-urban migrants. In doing so, I examine why social change is faster in cities. By contrast, most analyses of growing support for gender equality focus on micro- and/or macro-level characteristics. Micro-level variables include whether an educated/employed woman is more likely to stand for political office, share care work, or support gender equality. Macro-level studies often explore cross-national trends, such as whether higher rates of female employment are associated with more equitable divisions of leadership and/or care work (Cha and Thébaud 2009; Kroska and Elman 2009; Sullivan, Gershuny, and Robinson 2018; Sani and Quaranta 2017; Shu and Meagher 2018; Torre 2019). These macro-studies incorporate national averages, usually omitting subnational variation.

But national averages (e.g., aggregate rates of female employment) are unlikely to directly influence individuals' aspirations, expectations, ideologies, and relationships. No one "sees" or lives amid

a national average (contra Goldin 2006, 9). Individuals develop their aspirations and expectations through observation of their specific locales; their village, town or city. Their place-based experiences can differ considerably, even within a single country (Boudet et al. 2012; Evans 2018). Although many scholars regard it as a truism that support for gender equality is higher in cities, they rarely explain subnational variation in gender relations, or use these empirical observations to theorise rising support for gender equality.

There is also scope to fine-tune our theorisation of social norms. Again, norms strongly influence gender relations, often more so than individual characteristics (Mason and Herbert 2003; Pearce and Connell 2016; Thebaud and Pedulla 2016). People's concerns about how they will be perceived and treated by others may lead them to moderate their occupational choices, share of care work, sexual practices, living arrangements, political participation, and leadership bids. Expectations can motivate compliance, often reinforcing inequalities. However, the mechanisms - by which norms influence behaviour - are rarely articulated. Some conceptualize norms as behavioral trends (Butler 2004, 48-51). Others see them as "collective definitions of socially approved conduct," not individual consciousness, but "properties of a community" (Pearce and Connell 2016, 31-34, 46). But how do these widespread discourses, conventions, and intersubjective meanings actually *influence* people's behavior, motivate compliance, and thereby perpetuate gender inequalities? Further, what are norms, if not reducible to mental states? More theoretical work is needed to clarify ontology and causation, to explain why people challenge or conform to widespread practices.

I suggest we focus on people's reasons for acting (i.e., their beliefs and desires). Within beliefs, we can distinguish between an individual's internalized gender stereotypes (their unquestioned assumptions about members of a gender) and their norm perceptions (beliefs about what others think and do).<sup>1</sup> This distinction recognizes that someone might privately disavow gender stereotypes, yet comply with widespread practices due to concerns about how they will be perceived and treated by others. Stereotypes and norm perceptions are both learnt through observation of the world. By interacting with others, people gauge which behaviors are widely practiced and supported in their communities. The belief that peers will chastise deviation furnishes individuals with a self-interested reason to conform. If everyone else complies, we assume collective approval, not recognizing that others may be privately critical. We only revise our norm perceptions when we witness widespread behavioral change (see also Bicchieri, 2016). But if beliefs change only *after* witnessing behavioral change, what catalyzes *initial* behavioral change, amid risks of social censure? How do we overcome this 'chicken and egg' problem?

Drawing on comparative rural-urban research, this article explores how city living erodes gender inequality in Cambodia. First, the high cost of urban living and growth of industries seeking women (e.g., manufacturing and services) have increased the opportunity cost of gender divisions of labor. This raises self-interested support for female employment. Second, cities have increased exposure to disruption and deviation. Given the density, diversity, and interconnectedness of Cambodia's cities, urban residents live amid myriad encroachments, experiments, and attempts to push boundaries. By seeing scores of women demonstrate their equal competence in socially valued domains, urban residents come to question their gender ideologies. Third, cities enable association. Gathering together after work, urban residents have more opportunities to share, learn from, be inspired by, and collectively rethink heterogenous gender ideologies and practices. Association and exposure reinforce a positive feedback loop, with growing flexibility in gender divisions of labor. This article uses comparative rural-urban research to analyze why city-living erodes gender inequality.

## THE DRIVERS OF GENDER EQUALITY

Over the past five decades, in many countries there has been growing support for female education, employment, and political leadership. Possible drivers of these *temporal* changes include: the rise of time-saving domestic appliances and contraceptive devices (Coen-Pirani, Leòn, and Lugauer 2010; Goldin 2006; Greenwood, Sheshardi, and Yorukoglu 2005); shifting opportunity costs of gender divisions of labor (Ruggles 2015; Elmhirst 2002); and exposure to women in socially valued roles (Bolzendahl and Myers

2004; Ridgeway 2011). These are all theories of change over time. Can they also account for rural-urban differences (as highlighted by Boudet et al. 2012; Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Chung and Das Gupta 2007; Dirksmeier 2015; Evans 2018; Orso, Orso, and Fabrizi 2016; Rammohan and Johar 2009)? If not, we might question whether they fully explain the drivers of gender equality.

Some argue that time-saving devices, such as household appliances and contraception, reduced women's care work and catalysed growing female labor force participation in the United States (see Coen-Pirani, León, and Lugauer 2010; Goldin 2006; Greenwood, Sheshardi, and Yorukoglu 2005). Such technologies (along with electrification and safe water access) are more accessible in cities (DHS 2017). Could this explain subnational variation in gender relations? This may be part of the explanation, but perhaps incomplete. Less care work may not be enough to catalyze shifts in gender practices and beliefs, as we see from geographical comparisons. Fertility has rapidly declined in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, yet female labor force participation remains low. Meanwhile in Sub-Saharan Africa, fertility remains high, but so too is female labor force participation (Klasen 2018). Further, female labor force participation is often higher in rural areas, notwithstanding rural women's lower access to appliances, and larger volume of care work (DHS 2017). Many women just incredibly work long days, without reward or recognition.

Rising opportunity costs are another possible driver of female employment. As U.S. young men's wages fell in the 1970s-1980s, families could no longer rely on a male breadwinner, so came to regard female employment as advantageous (Ruggles 2015). Likewise in Indonesia, a long dry season and monetary crisis in 1998 precipitated increased support for female factory work (Elmhirst 2002, 163). In Zambia too, worsening economic security triggered rising female employment (Evans 2018). Across the world, female labor force participation is often counter-cyclical (Klasen 2018, 16). The opportunity cost of women staying at home also increases with the growth of sectors seeking women workers: manufacturing, tourism, healthcare, and call centers (Goldin 2006; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Klasen 2018; McDowell 2009).

This theory (that female employment rises with opportunity costs) could explain rural-urban differences. Opportunity costs may be greater in cities due to higher land and living costs, as well as more sectors seeking stereotypically feminine characteristics (not physical strength). Studies on rural-urban migration supports this hypothesis. As a rural-urban migrant from Inner Mongolia explained, "[Back in the village,] others would laugh at me if I had let my woman go outside and do this dirty job before. But here [in the city] it's impossible for me to sustain my livelihood of my household alone" (Zhang and Gao 2014, 191). The high cost of urban living provides a financial incentive to forego concerns about social respect. Self-interest helps overcome the aforementioned 'chicken and egg' problem.

However, economic self-interest does not provide a full explanation of rural-urban differences in gender beliefs and practices. Research in 20 low and middle-income countries finds that, notwithstanding poverty, rural families are less likely to acknowledge, appreciate, and applaud female labor force participation (Boudet et al. 2012). Perhaps, if people do not see many women demonstrating equal competence in socially valued domains, they may not even contemplate it, let alone regard it as beneficial. Further, even if rural women *are* earning money, something else may be required to undermine gender discrimination.

Besides economic self-interest, we also need to recognize beliefs. A growing literature suggests that people develop their gender ideologies through observation of the world. If people see only men in socially valued roles, they may doubt women's equal competence and regard their encroachments into men-dominated domains as risky and inappropriate. Given confirmation bias, people tend to ignore information that contradicts their assumptions: dismissing exceptions as outliers, not disproving stereotypes about the typical man or woman (Ridgeway 2011). People are more inclined to question their ideologies when they see a *multitude* of counter-examples (i.e., through prolonged exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labor) (Ridgeway 2011; Lu and Tao 2015). But herein lies a conundrum: without widespread exposure to women demonstrating equal competence in socially valued domains, gender beliefs endure – inhibiting behavioural change. How do societies overcome this 'chicken and egg' problem?

These theories of change over time all focus on female employment – widely-regarded as an important catalyst of gender equality. But perhaps they overlook another important catalyst. Support for gender equality is often higher in cities. Yet our existing theories of growing support for gender equality do not fully explain these rural-urban differences. This creates a puzzle. Drawing on comparative rural and urban research in Cambodia, I suggest that cities may raise the opportunity costs of gender divisions of labor; increase exposure to women in socially valued domains; and provide more avenues to collectively contest established practices. Interest, exposure, and association reinforce a snowballing process of social change.

## METHODS

I am keen to understand: what drives support for gender equality; test the widely-accepted hypothesis that female employment is catalytic; and consider what else (besides female employment) might explain rural-urban differences. Cambodia is an ideal case study. The growth of garment factories in rural Cambodia has created a labor demand shock. This enables me to test whether rising female employment (a shift in individual characteristics) increases support for gender equality in villages; why rural inequalities might still persist; and what further dynamics in cities might be important. Qualitative fieldwork was undertaken from July to September of 2016 with more than 50 participants: long-term rural and urban residents, rural-urban migrants, rural and urban factory workers, farmers, prosperous traders, teachers, political activists, university students (on scholarships), lecturers, and local government officials. Migrants' life histories were particularly valuable: by listening to their narratives, understanding how city-living had affected their beliefs and practices, I could test the alternative hypothesis that more progressive people move to cities.

This research was located in three sites, the capital (Phnom Penh), and two villages in Kandal and Takeo provinces (each within a few kilometers of a garment factory, clinics and police posts). These villages were within two hours' drive of the capital Phnom Penh, via tarmacked roads. Both sites were enmeshed in rural-urban flows: circular migration, remittances, goods, and ICTs. The Kandal village was not poor: they were middle-income farmers on historically fertile land. By purposefully selecting villages that were not extremely poor, and by interviewing rural-urban migrants from across the socio-economic spectrum, I tried to examine the effects of place, rather than income.

To undertake this research, I collaborated with Rosa Yi, who lectures on gender and development issues at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. The Kandal site is his home village. Rosa's in-depth local knowledge, familiarity and rapport with the villagers greatly enhanced the research process. We recognized that participants' self-presentations were inevitably influenced by our identities. For instance, they might exaggerate their support for gender equality, thinking this would be welcomed by me, a white, Western researcher (and possible source of financial support). Accordingly, we took great care to introduce ourselves as being interested in the village, and ongoing socio-economic change more broadly. We listened and followed *their* narratives, downplaying our interest in gender and rural-urban differences. We did not presuppose or pre-define gender in/equality, but rooted our analysis in participants' perspectives. This enabled attention to unanticipated issues, such as everyday public discussions and leisure. We also spent time with participants, joining their routines at the village café, market, garment factory, harvesting grass, hanging out in the city, and at the university campus. In Kandal, we stayed at Rosa's family home with his 72-year-old mother. Throughout the research process, we collectively reflected on findings, identifying common and divergent themes, asking his mother for her perspective on rural narratives, devising further lines of inquiry.

Data was recorded, transcribed into English, then transferred into software enabling qualitative text analysis (NVivo 11). The data was coded using emergent themes and subthemes: on the ways in which gender relations are and are not changing (e.g., rising support for female employment), as well as the drivers of those changes (e.g., rising living costs, environmental shocks). Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

## CITIES AS CATALYSTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

“What a man can do, a woman can do” reiterated (separately interviewed) female undergraduates in Phnom Penh. Had they ever heard such discourses back in their villages? “No,” they shook their heads. Indeed, this adage captures urban discourses of equality in urban (but not rural) Cambodia.

Urban women are increasingly venturing into historically masculine domains of education, employment, public discussions, and leisure. In Cambodian towns and cities, early marriage and teenage pregnancy are lower; the total fertility rate is almost one child less; gender gaps in literacy are smaller; as are differences in average monthly earnings and occupations (ILO, IPEC, and NIS 2013, 59; NIS and MOH 2015; NIS 2015, 49). Women technicians earn 13 percent less than their men counterparts in urban areas, but 35 percent less in rural areas (ILO, IPEC, and NIS 2013, 59). Only 12 percent of managers are women in rural areas, as compared to 42 percent in urban areas (ILO, IPEC, and NIS 2013, 36). Thus, even in occupations not requiring physical strength, gender inequalities are still larger in rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

In Cambodian towns and cities, the opportunity cost of women staying at home has greatly increased with the rise in urban living costs, and sectors seeking women laborers (garments, tourism, and other services) (Lopez-Acevedo and Robertson 2016; Mejía-Mantilla and Woldemichael 2017). In their struggles to manage school fees, rent, health care, and competitive consumption, urban residents increasingly support female employment. Financial incentives outweigh countervailing norm perceptions (lauding the male breadwinner and female purity). By seeing their neighbors prosper through female employment, others come to recognize its benefits, and follow suit – explained multiple generations of urban residents.

Rising female employment appears to shift gender ideologies. Urban residents and migrants detailed how prolonged exposure to women successfully performing socially valued roles led them to regard women as equally competent and deserving of status. Cham (a 24-year-old on a full university scholarship, interviewed next to his father’s cowshed) explained that upon arrival in Phnom Penh:

*I was surprised, because I had just left a village, where men like me feel they are better, more knowledgeable ... Men are supposed to be the head of the household. Men are supposed to travel far, to do business, while women stay at home and take care of the family... So I didn’t take girls’ ideas seriously. I thought I was more intelligent, and expected them to follow my ideas [translated]*

In village life, Cham explained, most people are farmers, interacting with other farmers, with similar experiences and outlooks. So, “You don’t really have new knowledge. People know similar things, so they repeat similar things. Rural people are left behind ... How they see women has not changed much over time ... they still perceive women as housewives” [translated]. Such expectations (together with concerns for safety) lead many rural parents to restrict their daughters’ movements. But in the city, parents seem more supportive of their daughters’ independent mobility and occupations.

In Phnom Penh, Cham was astonished to see “female lecturers, female heads of department, a lot of women working in the university, and many female class monitors.” He also attended a nongovernmental organization (NGO) event and watched a documentary about gender equality. He discussed these ideas with a friend, who volunteered for an NGO and explained that Cambodian women soldiers had played an important role in securing independence from France. This surprised Cham, who had previously regarded women as weak and fearful. But through cumulative exposure to women in positions of authority, gender sensitization, and discussion, he came to champion gender equality. Cham also remarked on rural-urban differences in public spaces:

*The café—It’s public, so it’s a space for men ... If women go, people will consider them kat leak [an imperfect woman]. In Phnom Penh, will you also find a café like that just for men a local café like this; it’s generally for old people. Women don’t go. I’ve never been to one like that in Phnom Penh. At university, we go to the canteen regularly as a group, men and women. [translated]*

These themes of urban exposure and association were widely reiterated by rural-urban migrants. Young migrants emphasized their enjoyment of diverse associations, learning new ideas, and seeing women in unexpected domains. Many had previously presumed women were “passive dependents,” unable to perform socially valued roles. Chenda, a female, rural-urban migrant student, remarked:

*When women are housewives, they are submissive. They are told to do; directed to do. It's not really equal. They did not have enough freedom. I think people are the same, we want to go out, but her husband think, "Every day you have been fed by me, so you cannot do anything without my agreement" ... I been experiencing this. Women here—students, staff, government worker, office worker—they have to go to work on a daily basis to get money. Without any job how can they live here? ... At the first time seeing this it surprised me a lot because I had been experienced women could be housewife and do house jobs like cooking, cleaning, caring children. When I come to Phnom Penh, thing just changed ... Women have same intellectual ability and physical ability — gender equality.*

Exposure and association were also emphasized by three rural-urban migrant, trainee flight attendants (Son, Bopha, and Chanda): “I meet new people, we share our experiences. But in rural areas, we just stuck with the old ideas. The idea is stuck because we don’t go out. [Here in the city] I feel wonderful. Seeing women dress up beautiful, earn their own living”. “I saw a woman driving a tuk tuk”. “Now it’s common”. “It really impressed me, ‘cause what a man can do a woman can do...”, added Son. “It shows men I can do it”, beamed Chanda.

Exposure to a multitude of people deviating from traditional practices seems to increase people’s confidence in the possibility of social change—not only affecting their internalized ideologies but also their norm perceptions. This creates mutually reinforcing, incremental experiments of minor transgressions. Having enviously eyed their friends doing homework, young girls pressure their parents to send them to school. As low-income hawkers develop wide social networks and seek out information to get by in the city, they learn about alternative practices and ideologies (see also Evans 2018; Simone 2008, 2013). After seeing housework work being shared by male neighbors, garment workers encouraged their husbands to follow suit. Not all requests are heeded, of course. Srey (a rural-urban migrant garment worker, now exposed to more co-operative, mutually-supportive urban marriages) came to regard her own husband as ‘useless’, not entitled to leisure, or her devotion. Having seen more equitable relations, she came to expect and demand better. He refused, and she promptly divorced him.

Other influences include hearing peers and NGOs champion equality; watching powerful role models in films; as well as reading media accounts of successful women at home and abroad. This has increased of late, with more donor funding for gender NGOs (Frewer 2017). In Cambodia, the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women increased from 5.8 percent in 1997 to 8.2 percent in 2000 to 20.3 percent in 2015 (ADB 2015a, 142). Having seen many women demonstrate their equal competence in socially valued masculine domains, urban residents can make sense of abstract discourses of gender equality.

By highlighting rural-urban migrants’ observations of *relatively* more egalitarian spaces, I do not mean to downplay Phnom Penh’s persistent inequalities. Men continue to dominate public fora, such as Parliament, trade unions, the Government-Private Sector Forum and chambers of commerce (ADB 2015b, 15). Gender pay gaps prevail (World Bank 2014, 33); work is often precarious, unsafe and dangerous; while police are unsympathetic to domestic violence (Brickell 2017). Furthermore, cities are not inevitably disruptive. Factory work hours are long, and tightly controlled. Breaks are brief, with time only for workers to gulp a sugary drink, guzzle a plate of rice and fatty meat, chat about bundles completed, and hasten back, as I observed during fieldwork. Due to the high cost of transport in Phnom Penh, factory workers have limited mobility. They typically associate with other migrant workers, not necessarily learning from the city’s rich diversity (see also Cook 2015, 43; Parsons 2017, 193 on Phnom Penh and Bangkok). Makara, a 23-year-old rural-urban migrant worker, said, “We don’t go out much ... We just go back and forth between factory and home.” [translated]

Notwithstanding such caveats, cities appear to accelerate social change by raising the opportunity costs of the male breadwinner model, amplifying exposure to women in socially valued domains, enabling collective discussions, and mutually-reinforcing, iterative experiments. This sustains a positive feedback loop.

## **SOCIAL CHANGE IS SLOWER IN VILLAGES**

Social change is also occurring in Cambodian villages, but at a slower pace and with less support for the urban adage that “women can do, what men can do.” To explain this, I turn to the village café in Kandal. At first glance, it was quite unremarkable: red plastic chairs clustered on a dirt floor, sheltered by a corrugated iron roof. On weekends, it became fiery and animated: male patrons were transfixed on televised Thai boxing. Weekdays were more relaxed: men’s discussions centered on farming and national politics. In the past decade, they had become much more critical of the government. Their awareness of popular dissent had increased through access to independent radio, owing to an improved signal, Facebook (via smartphones), and return migrants’ narratives. By hearing widespread critique, rural men became more confident in their collective capacity to challenge the government.<sup>3</sup>

Drought was a major concern. Many had lost crops the previous year, wasting expenditure on fertilizer, pesticides, bamboo, and insecticides, so decided not to replant. This situation was worsened by a government bridge-building project that temporarily blocked water flow to their fields. Having lost confidence in the commune council (local government), some farmers had formed a group, crowdsourcing funds for a generator to pump water from the creek to irrigate vegetable crops. I asked Sanna, a 46-year-old male farmer, if there were any women at the meeting. “No. It’s a man’s job. Women are considered as housewives. This activity is for men ... When men decide what to do, women will follow... Men are head of the family. In our village, men are *neak tver* [doers], women are *neak suoy* [helpers]. Men undertake most of the work, and become more knowledgeable.” [translated]

This account was widely corroborated — for both this specific initiative and collective discussions more broadly. Men’s leadership was typically explained with reference to their “longer legs,” (i.e., better travelled, larger social networks, so *neak cheh* [more knowledgeable]).<sup>4</sup> By contrast, rural Cambodian women have traditionally stayed at home, tending pigs and chickens, caring for large families, with few labor-savings tools (see also ADB 2015b, 21). While rural women do chat with their neighbors in passing, expressing frustrations about the quality of their children’s education, or their husbands’ drinking, such discussions are brief, hastened by the relentless demands of care work. Only men have the liberty to unwind at the café after farming, returning home when food is ready. Several rural women identified leisure time as an inequality, and lamented their dearth of free time. Others were less overtly critical. They would like their husbands to help, but regarded gender divisions of labor as inevitable, and assumed strategic silence to minimize conflict (see also Brickell 2011a, 1367; Ogawa 2004).<sup>5</sup>

By gathering at the café, learning from those with new sources of information, men are regarded as more knowledgeable. These perceptions influence everyday interactions. Feeling less informed, some women are reluctant to speak out on local and national socio-political issues, fearing mistakes and consequent mockery. Further, men at the café see their peers publicly criticizing the government and so feel emboldened. Meanwhile, women are less exposed to public dissent, so often lack confidence in collective resistance (see also Chhoeun, Sok and Byrne 2008, 542; Hiwasa 2013; Ogawa 2004).

Villagers in Kandal divulged that no one had ever initiated the idea of women’s public leadership. This can be understood in terms of internalized ideologies and norm perceptions. First, lacking exposure to women successfully undertaking leadership roles, few expressed confidence in their equal competence. Second, while some *did* privately wish for a female candidate, few anticipated wider support. As one female village chief explained, “I never dreamt I would become a village chief. In this village it is unheard of for women to be in authority ... I thought people would react badly to me” (Chhoeun, Sok and Byrne, 2008, 535). Even when elected to Commune Councils, women are typically assigned less prestigious, less remunerative roles: focusing on “women’s matters”, involving menial, voluntary work, such as preparing tea for their men counterparts (Chhoeun et al. 2008, 544; Sedara and Öjendal, 2014).



Few rural participants seemed troubled by women's absence in public fora, explaining that men already represented the family. While a minority was privately critical, they did not wish to be "the odd one out," encroaching upon masculine terrain. This is encapsulated in the extracts below, from separate interviews:

*"This is how we divide the work. At home we talk, exchange ideas, husband and wife. But in public, men go out and discuss amongst themselves. For my whole life, women do not go out and discuss... There's a lot of work to do at the home. Women go if they're invited, but there's no point in them going if the husband is already there". [translated]*

- Nakry, 54, rural, female home-based trader in Kandal.

*"If any woman wants to spend time in the café, she will be badly talked about. You cannot leave behind your housework: people value you because of housework. Generally women are not free". [translated]*

- Peou, 35, rural, female fruit seller at a nearby market.

*"Men tend to discuss among themselves. They don't involve women... Women are busy: cooking, cleaning, farming... It's only men who are free... That's life, there's nothing that women can do to change it... [But] I want it to change. I want men to pay more attention to what is going on inside the household: to pay more attention to their wives and baby, and less time drinking". [translated]*

- Rachana, 24, rural female garment worker.

*In the rural area, it's the men who decide everything in the house... Sometimes they won't even ask the wife. Men in the rural area, they act like they [are] the king.*

- Akara, 22, female student in Phnom Penh, originally from rural Takeo.

In sum by sharing ideas at the café, men come to be regarded as knowledgeable and thus naturally better leaders.

Rural gender inequalities are also shaped by gender divisions of labor, though these are changing. As one cow farmer in Kandal explained, historically you would often overhear a husband say to his wife, "You only live by depending on me" [translated]. Middle-age and elderly rural women tended to present themselves as dependents, reliant on male breadwinners for both income and ideas about the outside world. They seemed reluctant to complain, expressing limited sense of entitlement, recognition of alternatives or fear of their husband's anger (see also Brickell 2011a). As Chan, a 39-year-old garment worker in Takeo surmised,

*Historically there were only two things for women: housework and help with the farming ... Women didn't have anything to do. They just did all the cooking, the cleaning, looking after the cows, and helped with the rice farming. [translated]*

These gender divisions of labor influence young women's ambitions. A female student on a full scholarship at a Phnom Penh university explained that, back in her village, young women's expectations were limited to marriage and motherhood. Only two women in her village were high school graduates. Many had married at 16. "In Kmae tradition, the girl no need to be high knowledge, just do the wife. They just treat the girl like not have abilities, and sometimes they not want the girl go to school 'cos it's not safe – [it's] so far." Another student, the daughter of a housewife and rice farmer from an isolated village, explained:

*If you just see a lot of women working as housewives, you view women as someone who incapable of doing something else. Your perception of women would be like that. So why should I send my daughters to Phnom Penh for education?... Back in the province, I never imagined I could be a teacher at university, CEO or leader.*

While rural girls increasingly seek education and employment, their ambitions are often limited to running a business near home, to accommodate housework and stay near familiar areas. Some do wonder whether girls are as intelligent as boys, but often lack the confidence to go against the tide of public opinion. Even

if young women question these norms and seek independent mobility, many are constrained by parents and husbands who are concerned about safety, sexual propriety and neighborhood gossip.

Such concerns have lessened in the past decade. Mobility is increasing, with mass road-building and motorbike ownership. Ongoing school building programs increase proximity, alleviating concerns about daughters' safety. With government investment in infrastructure and Cambodia's high population density, many villages now have police posts, clinics and schools. Such proximity increases contraceptive access. The total fertility rate halved between 1990 and 2012—from six to three (Dingle, Powell-Jackson, and Goodman 2013; NIS and MOH 2015, 12-17; MOH 2016, 3). This reduces the volume of care work, and alleviates time constraints on female education and employment.

Besides lesser concerns about safety, and time constraints, rural families are increasingly aware of the financial benefits of women's earnings in the garment industry, tourism and Phnom Penh's burgeoning service sector. Given these economic incentives, many have forgone concerns about social respect. With more women migrating for waged work, it has become more widely accepted, especially in recent years when drought has threatened agricultural livelihoods. Compared to the male-dominated construction industry, garment work is *relatively* better and more regularly paid, enabling higher remittances (MOP 2013, 7-17; World Bank 2015, 30-31). Women also tend to remit more income than men (ADB 2015b, 28). In this context, some fathers even wished for daughters, citing their economic potential as garment workers. One farmer proclaimed his "unluckiness" in having *only* sons (as also observed by Parsons, Lawreniuk, and Pilgrim et al. 2014, 1377).

### **The Effects of Rising Women's Employment in Rural Areas**

Social change was slower in villages. But is it accelerated by rising female employment? To answer this question, and test that widely-accepted hypothesis, I explored how rural garment factories have influenced gender relations. All employed rural women expressed delight in being able to improve their families' economic situation. They reiterated increased self-esteem and pride. Some had started sharing care work with their husbands. Indeed, when we first arrived in Takeo we found the husband preparing lunch, which we enjoyed when his wife returned from the garment factory. Another disruptive gender performance was women motorbiking *en masse*. Historically, women were referred to as "short-legged": not venturing further than the fields. But now many women are independently mobile, going out to provide for the family – as narrated by Rachany, a 60 year-old rural woman whose daughter was working for an internet company in Phnom Penh,

*For my whole life, women have followed men. Historically, wives just followed their husbands. Women couldn't go very far. Women couldn't move around the kitchen. Only men could get out of the house, so they could get more information ... Women have children, so don't have time for anything else. Previously, women did not have higher knowledge. But now ... you look at the society and you see a lot of women working just like men. [translated].*

The effects of female employment vary by occupation. Traders who independently liaised with and learned from others were particularly confident. Kim, 35 years old, recently started motorbiking to a village 30km away to sell 100kg of local fruit – as encouraged by her sister (who works in Phnom Penh). Since starting her business, Kim excitedly emphasized that she had more ideas to share with her neighbors, great pride in her financial contributions, and independent mobility. She said:

*If you met me five years ago, I wouldn't have anything to tell you ... I was really scared, really careful with my words ... I was more of a listener ... I would not even try to engage in the conversation ... I would always be afraid of making a mistake ... afraid of people getting angry with me. Before, I only stayed at home [except to tend fruit trees] ... I was afraid of my husband. I would not try to argue ... If I wanted to do something and he rejected it, I would just follow him ... But since I've started making my own income, my words have been stronger ... When I got exposed*

*to the marketplace I gained new ideas. I told my husband that even if he disagrees with me, I will go ahead ... He's changed a lot ... Now he is very supportive, and I'm braver ... Before, I depended on my husband but now I want to try out some ideas on my own ... I've got to know other people over there. It's fun! [translated]*

However, Kim's account was unusual in our sample. Rural women workers generally said they felt unappreciated. It was rare for husbands to cook for their wives returning from the factory. Many women complained about their husbands becoming "more relaxed" (e.g., drinking all day) but still regarding themselves as breadwinners and household heads. Yet despite their newfound independent incomes, few rural women appeared to even contemplate divorce. The rarity of divorce and ensuing concerns about risk meant that it was rarely considered an option. There was no point complaining to police about a husband. It would be embarrassing, and the wife would end up paying for his release, when they inevitably reunited.

Rural women's struggles are encapsulated in the following interview extracts. "I am the main income provider, but never once has my husband recognised that", remarked Dara, a rural female teacher, married to a local government official [translated]. "A lot of my friends complain that their husbands are just staying at home, doing nothing.... You come home and you feel very underappreciated ... Even though you bring money home, they do not appreciate—[That] is what some of my friends complain. However much they earn, [social] change is very limited. Not only husbands but the community does not appreciate us women", echoed Mau, a 39 year old rural garment worker [translated]. Likewise for Phirun, a 36 year old male farmer in Kandal: "Women have become more economically significant in the family, especially when men lose a lot ... [But] some men wait for wives to cook for them. And the limited change in perceptions, it's not just upon men, it's also among women who work in the factory. Men are still seen as more important at home" [translated].

This continuity in rural gender relations is partly due to exposure and association. While women do now travel to garment factories, their time is tightly constrained – curbing networking and learning. Rural factory workers often regarded men as more knowledgeable, and so deferred to their decisions. Few rural women had seen married men cooking, so did not contemplate such redistribution, let alone push for it.

Thus, although rural women are increasingly important financial providers (given garment factory employment), men still tend to be regarded as more knowledgeable and better leaders. This partly reflects gender inequalities in leisure time and care work. But there are caveats. Rural participants were by no means homogenous. People's experiences and perspectives were mediated by their age, marital status, occupation, economic context and access to government services. Of the three major female-dominated occupations in the village (garment factory workers, traders and farmers), traders appeared most confident as public speakers. They liaised with a broad range of people, sometimes collaboratively, sometimes through struggle, but each time learned and expanded their horizons as highlighted in Kim's account above.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the causes of growing support for gender equality, via comparative, qualitative rural-urban fieldwork. It has examined how the impact of women's employment is mediated by rural/urban location, in order to revisit the widely-accepted theory that women's employment boosts support for gender equality (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009; Evans 2018; Ridgeway 2011; Shu and Meagher 2018). This rural-urban contrast is important because although many gender scholars affirm the importance of local context and the truism that city-dwellers are typically more supportive of gender equality, we know very little about the causes of rural-urban differences.

Going forwards, others might contribute to this field through: quantitative work with subnational data (to provide descriptive data on rural-urban differences); field experiments randomizing urban migration (to explore whether city-living causes a shift in gender relations); or comparative qualitative research (to understand the causes of these effects.<sup>6</sup> We also need to understand when and why cities do *not* undermine gender inequalities (see McIlwaine 2013; Quadlin and Doan 2018; Spain 2014 on gender-based

violence, housework, and urban design). The impact of urban residence is likely mediated by occupation, quality of services, and the sectoral composition of job growth (Evans 2018).

My comparative qualitative research suggests that Cambodian cities disrupt gender inequalities because they enable three key processes: *shifts* in perceived interests; *exposure* to women demonstrating equal competence in socially valued domains; as well as *association*, mutual learning, and collective critique.<sup>7</sup> In Phnom Penh, the opportunity cost of women staying at home has increased with the growth in economic sectors seeking women laborers, and rising living costs. With the ensuing rise in flexibility in gender divisions of labor, city residents have come to recognize its economic advantages. Resulting exposure to women successfully performing socially valued roles has undermined gender ideologies. People increasingly regard women as equally competent and anticipate social support. This shift in beliefs has fostered behavioral change, enabling a positive feedback loop. These shifts in perceived interests, exposure, and association are also happening in rural Cambodia, albeit more slowly. Rural remoteness and homogeneity curb exposure to alternatives, dampening confidence in the possibility of social change, deterring deviation.

Besides highlighting the disruptive power of cities, this article has demonstrated a key driver of social change, namely association. Although many rural Cambodian women are now important economic contributors, they rarely share and learn from diverse others. In my rural sites, local drought and political authoritarianism were always discussed in the village café – an exclusively male terrain. By gathering together, rural men learn from others with new sources, build on each other's contributions, creatively explore diverse solutions and accumulate expertise. Shut out of these conversations (by norm perceptions and domestic responsibilities), rural women are regarded as less knowledgeable and less suited to leadership. Thus, men continue to be valorized as more knowledgeable — “natural” leaders. Rural politics thus remains male dominated, notwithstanding growing female labor force participation.

This link between everyday public discussions, spaces, perceived knowledge and support for women's leadership is a fairly novel observation. Some scholars argue that by seeing women perform historically male-dominated roles, others will come to regard them as equally competent in a broad range of other domains, including leadership. I suggest such equivocation is not automatic. As we see from rural Cambodia, flexibility in gender divisions of labor is insufficient to accelerate wider progress towards gender equality. Interconnected, diverse, and densely-populated cities play a crucial (hitherto neglected) role in amplifying exposure, association, and collective critique, reinforcing snowballing processes of social change. By examining the causes of rural-urban differences, this article thus reveals important catalysts of gender equality.

## NOTES

1 Though the two are often conflated, as noted by Cislighi and Heise (2018).

3. This quantitative data may even underestimate the long-term impacts of city living. The population of Phnom Penh doubled between 1998 and 2008 (MOP 2012, 94). This was largely fueled by migration, rather than national population growth or revised city boundaries (MOP 2013, viii). High rates of migration may blur data on rural-urban differences, since many self-identifying “urban residents” are recent arrivals (potentially still influenced by rural norms). Their inclusion obscures the long-term effects of urban residence.

4. Of course, not all can afford radios and televisions. Further, many are not interested in this information, or disregard that which conflicts with their assumptions. Many rural participants, especially older generations, only listened to Buddhist teachings.

<sup>4</sup> This dynamic was also observed by Chhoeun, Sok and Byrne (2008, 542) and Ogawa (2004).

5. Urban women were much more inclined to either identify leisure time as an inequality or enjoy more leisure time.

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8. Comparative work is important here too. If only the wealthiest can afford city-living, rural-urban differences in attitudes may just reflect class composition (as Maxwell 2019 finds on immigration).

7 As Simone (2013, 245) observes, "[T]he intersection of bodies, materials, and discourses" enables "collective experimentation" (see also Evans 2018; Glaesar, 1999, 255; Merrifield 2013, 916; Simone 2008; Storper, van Marrewijk, and van Ort 2012). This hypothesis is further supported by research on women's rural-urban migration (Gaetano 2015; Zang 2013; see Hancock 2001; Jacka 2005).

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